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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000504

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SUBJECT: ON IRAN, ISRAEL AND US-MAURITANIA RELATIONS: HEADS
UP FROM THE PARLIAMENTARIAN MAJORITY

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 188

Classified By: Ambassador Mark Boulware for reasons 1.4 (c) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: According to Mohamed Aly Cherif, Parliamentarian Majority President and leader of President-elect Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's party Union Pour la Republique (UPR), the new government is willing to work with the opposition but the ball is now on the opposition's court. Cherif does not see parliamentary elections in the horizon as long as Democratic Opposition President Ahmed Ould Daddah and National Assembly President Messaoud Ould Boulkheir accept to work within the system and refrain from blocking parliament by contesting the elections. Cherif took advantage of PolOff's visit to deliver a clear message to the US: questions like Mauritania's relations with Iran, Israel and Syria should not get in the way of increased US-Mauritanian cooperation. Mauritania's national interest will dictate the country's approach to those questions and the US should respect that. Cherif's message could be interpreted as an announcement of increased cooperation with Iran and Syria, and a refusal to re-establish relations with Israel or even a radicalization leading to severing relations. It could also be seen as another case of the old Mauritanian game consisting on dangling the Israeli and Iranian cards in front of the US to encourage quicker and increased US engagement in Mauritania. End summary.

ON THE OPPOSITION AND THE ASSEMBLY'S FUTURE

12. (C) PolOff met with Cherif on July 30 to inquire about parliamentary perspectives following the election and the future role of the opposition. As in past meetings, Cherif was accompanied by Taleb Ould Sidi Ould Khalifa, Deputy and President of the External Relations Commission. Note: On August 2, Union Pour la Republique (UPR), headed by Aziz, will hold a General Assembly to choose a new leader as the constitution prevents presidents from heading political parties. According to rumors, Cherif stands as a favorite to become UPR's new president (reftel). End note.

13. (C) Cherif, who opened the meeting by noting his satisfaction with Ambassador Boulware's visit to President-elect Aziz, stated that Mauritania is looking forward to positive engagement with the US. He stressed that, despite the opposition's claims, the election was

transparent and there was no fraud. Cherif feels that Aziz demonstrated that he is an open leader by accepting the Dakar Accord and giving important Transitional Government of National Unity ministries to the opposition. He declared the future of the opposition will depend on whether they want to participate in a normal democratic process or whether they will continue contesting the election. When asked about the opposition's decision to call for a fraud investigation, Cherif stated the legal entities in charge of certifying the elections have pronounced themselves and now "the election file is entirely closed and will not be reopened." For Cherif, the ball is now on the opposition's court to decide whether they will boycott or participate and he called on the US to use its influence in encouraging participation.

14. (C) On the question of parliamentary elections, Cherif stated that Aziz had no intention to dissolve parliament and call for new elections as he had the majority. The priority now is to "start working as soon as possible" and elections would be costly and time-consuming. Nevertheless, if National Assembly President Messaoud Ould Boulkheir insists on blocking parliament by contesting the election, "the story will be different." "Our priority is to fight poverty, we will not put up with a blockage of institutions because a leader is upset," stressed Cherif. Regarding Ahmed Ould Daddah, Cherif confirmed Daddah resigned as head of the democratic opposition when he decided to run for president. Nevertheless, Cherif stated it is possible he will be invited to resume his position if the Assembly is not dissolved.

Note: The Democratic Opposition became a permanent component of the parliamentary system of checks and balances in 2007.

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Headed by the party that obtains the second place in parliamentary elections, the democratic opposition has a minister-ranked president whose role is to provide the opposition's input to the legislative process.

15. (C) Cherif said the National Assembly recessed on July 9 and will not resume sessions until November 1. Nevertheless, an extraordinary session has been scheduled to pass an Amended Finance Law to adjust the budget.

ON IRAN AND ISRAEL: A HEADS UP TO THE US

16. (C) Cherif abruptly changed the topic and asked PolOff to write down a message for Washington. He solemnly stated that the US "had to understand that the Government of Mauritania wants to have relations with the USG." Nevertheless, he said the problem of relations with Iran and Syria stood on the way. "We are not Iran or Syria," he stressed and asked the US to avoid "linking its views on Mauritania to its views on Iran and Syria." He underlined President Obama had shown an open attitude towards Iran and that "if the US cooperates with Iran and Syria they should let us cooperate with them as well." When asked whether Mauritania planned increased engagement with these countries, Cherif responded "this would be decided on the basis of national interest."

17. (C) Cherif also wanted PolOff to convey to Washington that Mauritania's attitude towards Israel should not taint US-Mauritania relations. PolOff asked Cherif whether Mauritania planned to resume relations with Israel, keep relations frozen or severe them. Cherif responded it would all depend on the Netanyahu government and progress on the Palestinian question.

18. (C) The third point Cherif wished to communicate is that Mauritania wanted the US to re-establish normal relations and to allow development and cultural cooperation to resume. "We want the US to give Mauritania all the chances given to other friendly countries," he stressed. PolOff said Ambassador was pleased with President-elect Aziz's proposed program and that

if the government remained inclusive and democratic, cooperation would not be an issue. Nevertheless, PolOff underscored the need for greater efforts on the anti-slavery and human rights fronts. Cherif said that Aziz could not be blamed for Mauritania's bad record because he still is not in power and the system has been corrupt since French colonial times. He stressed Aziz wished to clean the system and contribute to a more just society but that this would take some time.

COMMENT

19. (C) Cherif's message could be a heads up to the US about increased cooperation with Iran and Syria and about a refusal to re-establish relations with Israel or even a willingness to sever them. At the same time, Cherif could be "bluffing" and showing the US the Iranian and Israeli card as a way of spurring US interest and speeding up re-engagement. Taking in consideration the current state of the economy (see septel), the new government will need all the international help available to succeed. Cherif's message may signal Mauritania's desperation to see US development aid resume as soon as possible. End comment.

BOULWARE